

Bolsonaro's Clearcut Populism."The Barbarism has Begun"

Resistance to environmental and social reforms is growing among Indigenous peoples, teachers, students and organized labour

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"The barbarism has begun," declared the Pankarurú Indigenous nation after Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's neofascist president, won fraudulent elections in October 2018 amidst accusations of breaking financing rules and shamelessly spreading fake news. The Pankarurú inhabit a northeastern part of the Amazon rainforest, which Bolsonaro has pledged to open up to large-scale ranching, farming and mining operations, in violation of Indigenous land rights. According to Global Forest Watch, Brazil was already the global leader in rainforest destruction in 2018.

"The Bolsonaro regime poses the most significant threat to human rights and environmental protections in the Brazilian Amazon in a generation," says Christian Poirier, program director at the U.S.-based Amazon Watch.

The Amazon rainforest covers an area larger than the United States and produces 20% of the world's oxygen, which is why it is called "the world's lungs." The Amazon also contains 20% of the world's fresh-water, one-third of the Earth's plant and animal species, 400 Indigenous nations, and acts as a crucial carbon sink, thereby reducing global warming.

Marina Silva, a former environment minister in Brazil, warned in early May that Bolsonaro was transforming Brazil into an "exterminator of the future." She and seven other former Brazilian environment ministers from both left-wing and right-wing governments criticized Bolsonaro for "trying to destroy Brazil's environmental protection policies." Jose Sarney Filho, who served as environment minister under the right-wing Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Michel Temer governments, added:

"We're watching them deconstruct everything we've put together. We're talking about biodiversity, life, forests...the Amazon has an incredibly important role in global warming. It's the world's air conditioner; it regulates rain for the entire continent."

Bolsonaro's top security advisor, however, told a Bloomberg news reporter in May that it was "nonsense" to think of the rainforest as a world heritage, and that it "should be dealt with by Brazil for the benefit of Brazil." Echoing a position spouted by conservative climate deniers in Canada since the Harper government, General Augusto Heleno Pereira claimed,

"There's a totally unnecessary and nefarious foreign influence in the

Amazon.... NGOs hide strategic, economic and geopolitical interests.”

Alarm at the actions and policies of the Bolsonaro government during its first half-year in office extends to the areas of education, economic reforms, foreign and trade relations, as well as crime and corruption. Partly for this reason, Bolsonaro’s approval rating plummeted to 34% in March from 49% in January, when he took office. This is the lowest rating ever recorded for a Brazilian president after 100 days in power.

“Brazil is engulfed in a clear governability crisis...with Bolsonaro incapable of meeting the economic and social challenges of the country,” says Brazilian political scientist Helder Ferreira Do Vale of Hankuk University in South Korea.

He attributes this crisis partly to Bolsonaro’s ideological basis for policy-making rather than “facts and data.” The president’s foreign policy is a case in point.

Bolsonaro wants to abandon Brazil’s longstanding role as a progressive leader of the Global South. Instead, he would have Brazil become Washington’s junior partner in a deranged crusade to save “Western civilization” from decline by establishing its superiority over Asia and the Muslim world. Ferreira Do Vale calls these ideas the “obscure thoughts” of Ernesto Araújo, Brazil’s current foreign minister, who has written about recovering Brazil’s “Western soul” and would base Brazil’s foreign policy on “Christian values.”

In this worldview, according to Ferreira Do Vale, only the United States really matters to Brazil; relations with other Latin American countries are to be downgraded while China and Russia are now considered adversaries. This will be difficult to pull off in practice.

Seventy per cent of Brazil’s trade is with China. The agribusiness lobby, a major supporter of Bolsonaro and a very powerful group within his administration, alone accounts for 40% of Brazil’s total exports and 23% of the country’s GDP. (For comparison, agrifood accounts for 11% of Canadian GDP and 10% of merchandise trade.) Given that he was elected, in part, to solve Brazil’s economic crisis, Bolsonaro cannot afford to harm the crucial Sino-Brazilian economic relationship that is strongly supported by big agriculture.

Ferreira Do Vale also points out that Bolsonaro’s other major backer, the Brazilian military, from whose ranks several cabinet ministers were pulled, is skeptical about his rush to become a U.S. puppet. Parts of the military believe that such a “blind alignment might compromise the image of Brazil as being an autonomous strong country, which would have an impact on its leadership in Latin America and beyond,” he tells me.

The military is particularly concerned about Bolsonaro’s decision to hand over control of Base de Alcântara—the aeronautics and space military site located in Brazil’s northeast region—to the United States. Bolsonaro announced this when he met with President Donald Trump in Washington, D.C. this March. Trump gave Bolsonaro nothing in return.

“Brazil has accepted the Monroe Doctrine [that] gives the U.S. the right to intervene in the affairs of Latin American countries, which it has done 59 times since 1890,” says Conn Hallinan, an analyst with Foreign Policy in Focus. “This will mean increased efforts to overthrow the governments of Venezuela, Cuba

and Nicaragua. In the long run it will mean that Washington dominates the region once again. This is good for U.S. capital, not so good for the people of the Western Hemisphere.”

As with foreign and trade policy, economic reform, which is considered crucial to getting Brazil out of its prolonged recession, also appears to be out of Bolsonaro’s grasp. The president’s backers in the Brazilian financial sector and abroad, as well as international and domestic investors, want significant reforms to the country’s pension system passed by the Brazilian Congress. These powerful business interests see pension reform as the litmus test to determine whether the country is worth investing in.

Last year, 44% of Brazil’s budget (8.5% of GDP) went to social security and pensions, which is high compared to most OECD countries. (In Canada in 2017, 15% of the federal budget went to old-age benefits, while pensions are independently financed.) Bolsonaro has pledged to save 1 trillion reais (\$330 billion) by raising the pension age and requiring workers to pay into the program for longer. But his party does not have a majority in Congress where a three-fifths favourable vote is needed to pass the reforms. As Reuters reported in late May, Brazilian markets “have wobbled” due to this political infighting.

Ferreira Do Vale warns that

“Bolsonaro’s lack of political capacity to co-ordinate the approval of his economic reforms before Congress is compromising both short and long-term prospects of economic growth.”

The professor attributes this incapacity to Bolsonaro’s falling popularity, “which reduces his leverage power in the negotiations behind reform,” along with “political divisions within his party and cabinet ministers, and the bickering between Bolsonaro and political allies in the national congress such as Rodrigo Maia, the speaker of the House of Representatives.”

Bolsonaro’s pension reform is opposed by major Brazilian labour unions. Lenin Cavalcanti Brito Guerra, a professor of management at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte in Natal, Brazil, tells me the reform “can also worsen the [economic] crisis, since the poorest people will be more affected by it. The decrease in purchasing power for the poorest could increase impoverishment.”

Marcos Napolitano, a professor of history at the University of São Paulo, says the Bolsonaro government “has proved more disoriented, in political terms, than expected, investing more in the cultural war against the left-wing and progressive values than in an institutional agenda, even a conservative one, for governance.”

Striking a similar tone, Rosemary Segurado, a sociology professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, tells me that Bolsonaro’s government, “so far is worse than I imagined back in the elections. He doesn’t have a president’s attitude. He’s still in the mood of the election campaign. He does not have a plan to stop the economic crisis in the country.” She points out there are more than 13 million people unemployed in Brazil and that many workers are stuck in precarious jobs.

“Poverty is rising day by day, economic instability is growing and investors don’t feel safe in bringing their business to our country,” she says. “The image of Brazil in the world has never been so damaged, because of the controversies that the president and his ministers generate on many subjects, like his opinion about global warming, which is exactly the same as Donald Trump’s.”

While Bolsonaro appears ineffectual in carrying out his far-right agenda, public opposition to his presidency and his government is mounting significantly. On May 15, more than a million Brazilians demonstrated against Bolsonaro’s intention to cut the country’s education budget by 30% and his pension reforms. According to The Guardian (U.K.), the announcement sent “shockwaves” through federally funded universities. Teachers, students and workers marched in 180 cities in all Brazilian states.

Barbara Ottero, a 29-year-old master’s student, told the Guardian,

“They will make education totally inaccessible. It’s practically privatizing.”

Segurado agrees that privatization is likely Bolsonaro’s ultimate goal. Teachers unions held another mass demonstration on May 30, while a general strike co-ordinated by organized labour unions was scheduled for June 14.

Meanwhile, the Guajajara Indigenous nation in the Amazon rainforest has taken matters into its own hands to stop illegal logging, fishing and hunting. A group of 120 Guajajara natives calling themselves “Guardians of the Forest” have set fires to illegal logging camps. Since late 2012, when the group was created, the Guardians have destroyed 200 camps.

Olimpio Santos Guajajara, the leader of the Guardians, told Reuters in May,

“I ask the world to look at our struggle and recognize our activities as legal...because we are fighting for our lives and also for the lungs of the world.”

Laercio Souza Silva Guajajara, another guardian, added:

“It’s our fight for the children, for the old, for the whole world.... We’ll fight until the end, until the last breath.”

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